



## Everyday dynamics in generalized social and political trust



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 September 2015

Revised 6 March 2016

Accepted 29 April 2016

Available online 30 April 2016

#### Keywords:

Trust

Ecological momentary assessment

Traits as density distributions of states

Within-person variability

Stability of interindividual differences

### ABSTRACT

We applied the *traits as density distributions of states* approach to generalized expectations of trustworthiness, namely, social trust and trust in politicians. Using an experience sampling study ( $N = 47$ ), we assessed state social trust and trust in politicians four times a day for 2 weeks. Within-person variability was found to be low but meaningful as it was predicted by variations in affect, interactional trust, and prior experiences. There was high stability in interindividual differences in the mean levels of state trustworthiness expectations and in the levels of within-person variability. Our study provides a comprehensive understanding of stability and variability in generalized expectations of trustworthiness and indicates broad applicability of the *traits as density distributions of states* approach.

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### 1. Introduction

Social and political trust can be viewed as constructs that characterize individuals across situations and time. This conception is reflected, for example, in research attempts to predict political behavior from dispositional measures of social and political trust (e.g., Crystal & DeBell, 2002; Eder & Katsanidou, 2015; Halmburger, Rothmund, Baumert, & Maier, in preparation; Shah, 1998). At the same time, experimental research has suggested that social and political trust can be affected by situational factors, such as negative media content (e.g., Allen & Burrell, 2002; Halmburger, Baumert, & Rothmund, in preparation; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Rothmund, Gollwitzer, Bender, & Klimmt, 2015) or information on corruption (e.g., Rothstein & Eek, 2009). However, to date, there is no systematic knowledge about whether and how social and political trust fluctuate in everyday life. In other words, within-person variability in social and political trust has been largely neglected.

Novel developments in personality psychology highlight the relevance of within-person variability for a complete understanding of personality traits. The so-called *traits as density distributions of states* approach (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015) stresses that the stability of interindividual differences and intraindividual variability in behavior, thoughts, and feelings can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. In the present paper, we used

an experience sampling methodology to test whether this approach could be fruitfully applied to generalized expectations, namely, social trust and trust in politicians (as one aspect of political trust). First, we asked whether there is a significant degree of intraindividual variability in social trust and trust in politicians in everyday life. We compared levels of variability in these generalized trust concepts with those of affect and interactional trust (i.e., trust in concrete interaction partners) as a kind of benchmark because the latter two have been shown to vary considerably across situations and interaction partners (e.g., Eid & Diener, 1999; Fleeson & Leicht, 2006). Second, we explored the temporal stability of interindividual differences in social trust and trust in politicians as well as the stability of intraindividual variability. In other words, we investigated whether individuals could be characterized by relatively stable locations and sizes with respect to their individual state distributions. Third, we aimed to establish that intraindividual variability is psychologically meaningful and is not merely a reflection of random measurement error. Therefore, we tested whether variations in social trust and trust in politicians (a) would be associated with each other and with variations in interactional trust and affect in theoretically predictable ways, and (b) could be explained by prior experience—more specifically, with experienced interpersonal conflict shaping social trust, and the reception of political information shaping trust in politicians.

Asking these questions is important for obtaining a complete understanding of the psychological functioning of generalized kinds of trust. Knowledge about the stability of interindividual differences in social trust and trust in politicians is relevant for

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determining the usefulness of these concepts for the prediction of habitual behavioral tendencies, such as the likelihood of engaging in political action across different political issues (e.g., Boeckmann & Tyler, 2000). Simultaneously, knowledge about the extent to which people experience fluctuations in their social and political trust in everyday life can be helpful for optimizing the prediction of behavior in concrete situations. For example, given systematic within-person variability in social trust and trust in politicians, the prediction of a certain form of political activism under specific circumstances (e.g., voting in governmental elections; Halmburger, Rothmund, et al., in preparation) might be enhanced by taking into account people's momentary levels in these kinds of trust rather than their average levels of trust alone (Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994). Moreover, identifying systematic interindividual differences in within-person variability in social trust and trust in politicians will imply that the prediction of concrete behaviors from trait measures of trust can be more accurate for some people than for others (e.g., Bem & Allen, 1974).

In personality psychology, estimating the applicability of the *traits as density distributions of states* approach to generalized expectations of trustworthiness can be used to test the limits of this approach. Fleenon and Leicht (2006) already used this approach to investigate stability and variability in interactional trust. However, as generalized expectations might fluctuate less strongly than relationship-specific expectations in reaction to situational experiences, observing psychologically meaningful intraindividual variation would indicate the broad applicability of this approach to the understanding of trait and state variables in psychology.

## 2. Social trust and trust in politicians

Social trust captures the degree to which individuals believe that others are generally trustworthy (Rotter, 1967; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). Persons high (as compared with low) in social trust tend to expect benevolent motives in interaction partners. Therefore, they are willing to make themselves vulnerable to the actions of others (Jones, Couch, & Scott, 1997; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rotter, 1971; Yamagishi, 2011), particularly in socially uncertain situations, for example, situations involving conflicts of interest (Balliet & Van Lange, 2012).

Trust in politicians reflects the expectation that politicians as a social group are trustworthy (Halmburger, Rothmund, et al., in preparation; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). To the extent that a person believes politicians in general are competent, morally upright, and responsive to citizens' needs, the person will hold the generalized expectation that "politicians will perform particular actions that are important to the citizen/voter, irrespective of the [citizen's/voter's] ability to monitor or control the politicians" (Halmburger, Rothmund, et al., in preparation, p. 5). Trust in politicians can be understood as one constituent of political trust, besides trust in political institutions or the political system (Schiffman, Thelen, & Sherman, 2010; Schoon & Cheng, 2011; Wiggins & Bynner, 1993).

Both concepts, social trust and trust in politicians, capture individuals' expectations of the intentions or behaviors of others in situations where the individuals' outcomes depend on the other people's actions (social interdependence) and where control is limited. Most important, both concepts refer to generalized expectancies. As such, they can be distinguished from interactional trust, meaning trust in a concrete interaction partner, as well as from trust in a concrete politician (Couch & Jones, 1997; Mayer et al., 1995). In other words, it is assumed that people have mental representations of the trustworthiness of humans overall (or particular social groups, such as the group of politicians) that, in a

social interaction, may shape the person's trust toward a concrete interaction partner and, thus, predict behavior. Rotter (1971) emphasized that such generalized expectancies should shape interactions, especially in situations in which specific information about the interaction partner is not readily available.

Expectancies about the trustworthiness of different social groups (e.g., politicians) are assumed to be related to the more global concept of social trust, yet the two concepts are distinct (e.g., Couch & Jones, 1997; Schiffman et al., 2010). From a developmental perspective, social trust is hypothesized to evolve from experiences with primary caregivers in early childhood (Bowlby, 1988; Erikson, 1964) that are generalized across similar others (Rotter, 1971) and crystallize in adolescence (Flanagan & Stout, 2010). Whereas cultural theories of political trust propose that social trust is projected onto political actors and institutions (Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1993), there is empirical evidence that experiences with political and social institutions shape political trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). Taken together, social trust and trust in politicians are assumed to be related yet distinct constructs, with partially distinct kinds of experiences feeding into both kinds of trust.

## 3. Psychological functioning: state and trait?

Are social trust and trust in politicians best described as traits or states? In personality psychology, the distinction between trait and state variables is based on the level of relative temporal stability and consistency across situations observed in patterns of subjective experiences or behaviors. More precisely, the extent to which interindividual differences in patterns of behavior, thoughts, or feelings remain stable across time and situations determines whether a variable meets the prerequisites for being called a trait. Classic examples of traits are personality factors such as the so-called Big Five (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness). Interindividual differences in these variables have been shown to be highly (albeit not perfectly) stable across the lifespan (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and serve to predict behavioral outcomes across time (e.g., Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). However, individuals are also highly responsive to situational characteristics and requirements (e.g., Mischel, 1973). Accordingly, Fleenon (2001) found that people displayed considerable intraindividual variation across time and situations in how they acted: "The average individual routinely and regularly expresses all levels of all traits" (p. 1011).

To reach an understanding of how to integrate the stability of interindividual differences with intraindividual variability in behavior, Fleenon (2001) proposed the *traits as density distributions of states* approach (e.g., Bleidorn & Denissen, 2015; Church & et al., 2013; Fleenon & Gallagher, 2009). As a basic assumption, momentary behaviors, thoughts, and feelings can be described as personality states by using the same dimensions that serve to describe interindividual differences in trait levels as general tendencies to behave, think, and feel. Across time and situations, the frequencies with which a person displays different state levels can be represented in the form of a density distribution (Fleenon & Jayawickreme, 2015). Whereas people can show considerable variability across situations (behaving introvertedly at times and extravertedly at other times), they are characterized by quite stable general tendencies when their behavior is aggregated across situations. In other words, the location of the distribution of an individual's various states (i.e., an individual's mean across situations) as well as the distribution's size (i.e., the degree of variability in the states) are what characterize people and reliably distinguish them from one another. This conception of traits is in accordance with situational affordances (e.g., introverted behavior being

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